

Electronic Word-of-Mouth: A Systematic Literature Analysis

Marco Schmä¹, Tim Wilke² and Alexander Rossmann³

Abstract: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) communication plays an increasingly important role in modern business. The underlying concept of word-of-mouth (WoM) communication is well researched and has proved highly significant in respect of its impact on customers purchase behavior. However, due to the advent of digital technologies, decision-making among customers is progressively shifting to the online world. Consequently, eWoM has received a lot of attention from the academic community. As multiple research papers focus on specific facets of eWoM, there is a need to integrate current research results systematically. Thus, this paper presents a scientific literature analysis in order to determine the current state-of-the-art in the field of eWoM. Five main research areas were analyzed, supporting the need for further eWoM studies and providing a structured overview of existing results.

Keywords: eWoM, electronic word-of-mouth, communication, literature analysis

1 Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) communication is increasingly gaining significance. This development is driven by the impressive proliferation of digital media in customer decision processes and the correspondingly large number of scientific papers published on digital marketing communication in recent years [AB11, He04, Zh10]. We now have research results bearing on a wide variety of issues in the area of eWoM. Yet, given that these issues are highly specific, a full overview on the research area has proved elusive. To relieve this situation, Cheung and Thadani [CT12] carried out a systematic literature analysis, and examined numerous research papers on and around eWoM from 2000 to 2010. As social media, consumer reviews and other facets of eWoM have grown rapidly in recent years, research activities have also registered a significant uptick, yielding a fill of numerous insights since 2010. Hence, the important contributions of Cheung and Thadani need to be assessed critically due to the timeliness of the results.

For purposes of an up-to-date overview on current research, we conducted an additional literature analysis on scientific publications from 2010 to 2016. In addition, we evaluated these papers for scientific significance based on their citation impact. The publications

¹ Reutlingen University, Faculty Informatics, Alteburgstr. 150, 72762 Reutlingen, marco.schmaeh@reutlingen-university.de.

² Reutlingen University, Faculty Informatics, Alteburgstr. 150, 72762 Reutlingen, tim.wilke@reutlingen-university.de.

³ Reutlingen University, Faculty Informatics, Alteburgstr. 150, 72762 Reutlingen, alexander.rossmann@reutlingen-university.de.

thus determined were then subjected to a deeper content analysis and categorized into five main research areas.

In the course of this paper, we address the following research questions: (a) how is current research on eWoM structured?; (b) which core areas can be identified in current research on eWoM?; and (c) which areas suggest themselves for future research? Our findings support the need for further studies on eWoM by providing a structured overview of existing research results and identifying relevant areas for further research.

2 Theoretical Foundation

In order to understand the concept of eWoM, it is, first of all, worth taking a closer look at word-of-mouth (WoM) itself. According to an early definition by Arndt [Ar67], WoM is a kind of oral communication about brands, products or services between a recipient and a sender; the sender is regarded as acting independently and not from commercial interest. In a more recent definition, Anderson [An98] emphasizes the informal nature of the communication processes by describing WoM as “communications between private parties [...] rather than formal complaints to firms and/or personnel”. Electronic word-of-mouth, in contrast, can be defined as a special kind of WoM, where the means of communication rely on electronic formats and digital media. Both Hennig-Thurau et al. [He04] and Stauss [St00] in their respective attempts to define eWoM, explicitly identify the Internet as the key communication medium. According to Cheung and Lee [CL12], the Internet offers an unparalleled degree of scalability and diffusion speed, which is facilitated by the broad spectrum of communication platforms and the advent of asynchronous communication. In contrast to traditional WoM, communication is no longer limited to small groups of individuals who usually share information in private conversations [CT12]. Instead, with the rise of mobile Internet access, any individual may join a conversation any place and any time.

3 Method

In order to focus on the presented three research questions, a systematic literature analysis was conducted. The underlying method was adapted from vom Brocke et al. [Br09] as well as Webster and Watson [WW02]. EWoM represents an interdisciplinary area of research, so databases from the business sciences and IT were included in the research process. Therefore, relevant work was captured from (a) the Association for Computing Machinery Digital Library (ACM); (b) EBSCO Business Source Complete; (c) Emerald Insight; and (d) IEEE Xplore Digital Library. In order to be considered for this study, publishers had to have published a minimum number of papers relating to the eWoM field. For databases (a), (c), and (d), a threshold of two was set and for database (b) a threshold of five. Search and analysis was conducted in March 2016 using the search criteria presented in Table 1.

Search criteria	Selection
Language	English
Search string	eWoM \vee (electronic \wedge Word \wedge of \wedge Mouth)
Year of Publication	2010 – 2016
Only consider author-supplied keywords	Yes

Table 1: Search Criteria for Database Research

A total of 206 papers matched the given search criteria. This set of papers represented the basis for the subsequent manual evaluation. First of all, duplicates were removed which had arisen from the use of multiple literature databases. The remaining subset comprised 183 papers. In order to determine the most relevant papers from this subset, we assessed the number of citations for each paper in related research papers. The underlying idea is that highly cited papers generally provide superior research results, pointing to a major scientific impact.

In contrast, publications with few citations can be interpreted as less relevant and thus excluded from further analysis. We determined the number of citations by means of the Google Scholar search engine. In order to evaluate the importance of the different papers over time, the absolute number of citations per paper was normed by a division factor. This allows for the fact that older publications are expected to have a higher number of absolute citations. Table 2 provides an overview of the division factors applied for the different years. In the further analysis, only papers that revealed a citation quotient equal or larger than 10 were taken into consideration. Finally, 33 highly relevant publications could be identified and these papers are presented in Table 3.

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Division factor	7	6	5	4	3	2	0.25*

* Database analysis until and including March 2016, i.e. the first quarter of the year

Table 2: Applied Division Factors

Subsequently, the contents of these 33 research papers was analyzed in detail and categorized by means of structured content analysis on the basis of similarities and differences in the orientation, content, and results of research.

Authors	Publication year	Division factor	Citations	Citation quotient
Hennig-Thurau et al.	2010	7	557	79.57
Cheung and Lee	2012	5	209	41.80
Cheung and Thadani	2012	5	203	40.60
Ho and Dempsey	2010	7	278	39.71
Bronner and de Hoog	2011	6	184	30.67
Zhang, Craciun, and Shin	2010	7	196	28.00
Gupta and Harris	2010	7	159	22.71
O'Connor	2010	7	159	22.71
See-To and Ho	2014	3	60	20.00
Sotiriadis and van Zyl	2013	4	76	19.00
Ambler and Bui	2011	6	107	17.83
Lee et al.	2011	6	101	16.83
Eckler and Bolls	2011	6	99	16.50
Chu and Choi	2011	6	96	16.00
Utz, Kerkhof, and van den Bos	2012	5	79	15.80
Bae and Lee	2011	6	89	14.83
Cheng and Huang	2013	4	58	14.50
Lee, Law, and Murphy	2011	6	83	13.83
Back, Ahn, and Choi	2012	5	68	13.60
Racherla and Friske	2012	5	67	13.40
Jalilvand and Samiei	2012	5	63	12.60
Kim, Mattila, and Baloglu	2011	6	74	12.33
Tham, Croy, and Mair	2013	4	49	12.25
Elwalda, Lü, and Ali	2016	0.25	3	12.00
Dickinger	2011	6	69	11.50
Kim and Gupta	2012	5	57	11.40
Levy, Duan, and Boo	2013	4	45	11.25
Munar and Jacobsen	2013	4	45	11.25
Yeh and Choi	2011	6	67	11.17
Yoo, Sanders, and Moon	2013	4	43	10.75
Reichelt, Sievert, and Jacob	2014	3	32	10.67
Lee, Kim, and Kim	2012	5	52	10.40
Ha and Im	2012	5	52	10.40

Table 3: Most relevant papers in eWoM Research

4 Results

Five distinct categories could be identified on the basis of the eWoM research literature considered: Participation in eWoM, typification of participants, impact on user behavior, used media, and used content. Allocation of the publications to the respective categories is illustrated in Table 4. Due to the limited scope of this paper, not all the results of the analysis can be presented in detail. For this reason, we will concentrate on the most significant.

Category	Subcategory	Publications
Participation in eWoM	Social factors	Cheung and Lee 2012; Ho and Dempsey 2010; Lee, Kim, and Kim 2012; Reichelt, Sievert, and Jacob 2014; Yeh and Choi 2011; Yoo, Sanders, and Moon 2013
	Help	Bronner and de Hoog 2011; Cheung and Lee 2012; Yoo, Sanders, and Moon 2013
	Personal factors	Ho and Dempsey 2010; Lee, Kim, and Kim 2012
	External factors	Ha and Im 2012
	Economic factors	Yoo, Sanders, and Moon 2013
	Trustworthiness	Reichelt, Sievert, and Jacob 2014
Typification of Participants	Gender	Bae and Lee 2011; Kim, Mattila, and Baloglu 2011
	Family status	Bronner and de Hoog 2011
	Age	Bronner and de Hoog 2011; Tham, Croy, and Mair 2013
	Income	Bronner and de Hoog 2011
	Expertise	Bae and Lee 2011; Lee, Law, and Murphy 2011
	Geography	Chu and Choi 2011
	Author	Dickinger 2011
	Self-presentation/ assessment	Lee, Kim, and Kim 2012
Impact on User Behavior	Purchase intentions and decisions	Amblee and Bui 2011; Bae and Lee 2011; Elwalda, Lü, and Ali 2016; Jalilvand and Samiei 2012; See-To and Ho 2014; Sotiriadis and van Zyl 2013; Tham, Croy, and Mair 2013; Zhang, Craciun, and Shin 2010
	Online purchase	Cheng and Huang 2013; Elwalda, Lü, and Ali 2016; Utz, Kerkhof, and van den Bos 2012
	Product choice	Amblee and Bui 2011; Gupta and Harris 2010; Zhang, Craciun, and Shin 2010
	Reputation	Amblee and Bui 2011
	Intention to pass on	Eckler and Bolts 2011

Used Media	Product review/assessment	Kim and Gupta 2012
	Trust	Elwalda, Lü, and Ali 2016; Utz, Kerkhof, and van den Bos 2012
	Customer relation	Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010
	Social networks	Chu and Choi 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Levy, Duan, and Boo 2013; Munar and Jacobsen 2013; See-To and Ho 2014; Tham, Croy, and Mair 2013
	Multimedia services	Eckler and Bolls 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010
	Messaging services	Munar and Jacobsen 2013; Sotiriadis and van Zyl 2013
	Blogs	Munar and Jacobsen 2013
	Travel agencies/websites	Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Jalilvand and Samiei 2012; Kim, Mattila, and Baloglu 2011; Lee, Law, and Murphy 2011; Levy, Duan, and Boo 2013; Munar and Jacobsen 2013; O'Connor 2010
	Online shops (incl. review platforms)	Amblee and Bui 2011; Baek, Ahn, and Choi 2012; Bronner and de Hoog 2011; Cheung and Lee 2012; Elwalda, Lü, and Ali 2016; Gupta and Harris 2010; Ha and Im 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Racherla and Friske 2012; Tham, Croy, and Mair 2013; Utz, Kerkhof, and van den Bos 2012; Zhang, Craciun, and Shin 2010
	Forums	Lee et al. 2011; Yeh and Choi 2011
Used Content	Positive/negative contents	Bronner and de Hoog 2011; Lee et al. 2011; Levy, Duan, and Boo 2013; O'Connor 2010
	Aspects included	Bronner and de Hoog 2011
	Bogus contents	O'Connor 2010
	Type of content	Bronner and de Hoog 2011; Eckler and Bolls 2011
	Emotions	Eckler and Bolls 2011; Kim and Gupta 2012
	Perception	Baek, Ahn, and Choi 2012; Dickinger 2011; Elwalda, Lü, and Ali 2016; Racherla and Friske 2012
	Online channel	Dickinger 2011

Table 4: Category System

4.1 Participation in eWoM communication

The category dealing with participation in eWoM communication covers research papers that deal with the motives to actively participate (e.g. creating or sharing eWoM content) or passively participate (e.g. consuming eWoM content). A frequently stated reason for participation in eWoM refers to emotional factors. Obviously, eWoM creates a feeling of belonging, particularly when sharing positive content [CL12, HD10]. In a similar way, self-presentation and self-assessment play an important role in the generation of eWoM. Thus, consumers register a greater intention to practice eWoM when they can identify themselves with other members of the group and share mutual traits [Le12]. This applies in particular to brand communities, where enthusiasts actively lobby for a positive evaluation of the brand [YC11]. Another motive can be linked to positive emotional benefits created by helping other Internet users [BH11, CL12] as well as a longing for interpersonal interaction and fondness [HD10]. However, all of the presented factors represent intrinsic motives. Consequently, monetary rewards play a minor role in eWoM communications [Yo13]. Furthermore, websites that are perceived as offering high quality content improve consumers' media and shopping experiences and, in turn, foster the sharing of positive experiences with others [HI12]. Only few research papers with high citation impact work on the consumption of eWoM. Nevertheless, in this context, it can be stated that the trustworthiness of the sender has a significant influence on the receiver's attitude and intention to consume eWoM content [Re14].

4.2 Typification of Participants

The second category of results covers research papers on the distinguishing factors of eWoM participants. Here the demographics of participants play a significant role, as too does their gender. With respect to the latter, research results prove that female consumers read reviews more intensively [Ki11] and are more strongly influenced in their purchase decision by online reviews than is the case with male consumers [BL11]. Another difference can be traced on the basis of consumer age. Previous research has established that older people participate less intensively in eWoM than younger people do [BH11, Th13]. Additionally, there are significant results pointing to a different eWoM usage for couples. Irrespective of the number of children, couples engage more frequently in eWoM than single people do [BH11]. Geographical and cultural differences could equally be observed. Chinese users, for example, develop a stronger trust in the recommendations of their digital peers and are, therefore, more influenced by them than is the case with, say, US users [CC11]. With regard to income, it can be determined that participants in the higher or lower middle bracket of income distribution are more likely to participate in eWoM communication [BH11]. In addition, participants can be differentiated based on the interdependencies within their social groups. Accordingly, we may distinguish two kinds of participant: on the one hand, there are participants that appreciate their independence and pursue their own goals; and, on the other hand, there are those who see themselves as strongly associated with other participants and, as a result, become more involved in helping others by e.g. sharing their experiences [Le12].

4.3 Impact on User Behavior

The category of impact on user behavior covers research that deals with the various effects of eWoM communications. Numerous researchers confirm that consumers are influenced by eWoM communication in their decision-making processes [E116, JS12, SH14, SZ13, Th13]. Adopting firms perspectives, this can be used specifically to improve the reputation of products and brands [AB11]. Furthermore, research results show that as the number of reviews increases, the judgment of products is driven in a positive or negative direction, as the case may be [KG12]. In general, however, consumers are more influenced by negative eWoM communications than by positive ones [BL11]. Yet the purpose of the product considered also plays a role. Positive eWoM contents are perceived as more convincing provided the product considered is associated with a promotion consumption goal (e.g. image processing software for optimizing photos). In contrast, negative eWoM contents are perceived as more convincing when products cover a preventive need (e.g. antivirus software to prevent damage) [Zh10]. In addition, research supports the assumption that online reviews unfold a significant influence on the consumer's intention to purchase via the Internet [E116] or in online shopping communities [CH13]. Although eWoM contents frequently contain valuable information, they do not necessarily lead to optimal decisions. Consumers with little motivation regarding the observance and processing of information tend to make suboptimal decisions on the basis of eWoM communication [GH10]. Furthermore, when judging the trustworthiness of an online sales platform, reviews are more important than the general reputation of the sales platform [Ut12]. Electronic WoM also has an impact on customer relations. Accordingly, a number of factors could be identified that firms should take into consideration when managing their customer relationship [He10].

4.4 Used Media

The next category deals with research papers investigating the different media formats that consumers use for eWoM. Video and music streaming services, online video games, virtual worlds, portals, online shops, online travel agencies, whistleblower websites and social networks could be identified as the main media for eWoM communication [He10]. A conceptual framework which reveals the influence the short message service Twitter is having on decisions made by tourists, has already been developed [SZ13]. Furthermore, research papers have already examined the effects of eWoM on the evaluation of holiday destinations [Th13] as well as tourists' involvement in creating and sharing digital information [MJ13]. Also, numerous papers deal with the evaluation of travel websites [JS12, Ki11, Le11a, Le13, Oc10]. And there are also studies that analyze self-presentation and assessment [Le12] as well as the effects of eWoM in social networks on the purchasing intentions of consumers [CC11, SH14]. Furthermore, there are now numerous research results available on both retailer websites and review platforms [AB11, Ba12, BH11, CL12, E116, GH10, HI12, RF12, Ut12, Zh10] as well as forums [Le11b, YC11].

4.5 Used Content

This last category covers research papers that deal with the elements, perception, and effects of certain eWoM contents. Electronic WoM participants who have personal, i.e. self-involved, motives for participating in the communication (e.g. monetary rewards or self-presentation) include fewer aspects in the communication than do eWoM participants who wish to help others [BH11]. In addition, the former group shares more negative eWoM contents than the latter group [BH11]. Socially engaged participants, in contrast, tend to share suitable photos with other participants [BH11]. Furthermore, there are some research results that focus on emotional aspects of the communication. Thus, it has already been examined how consumers interpret emotional contents in reviews and how these interpretations affect the perception and judgement of products [KG12]. Viral advertising videos represent a special segment here. In the case of these, it could be proven that pleasing contents unfold stronger effects on the consumers' attitude than do, say, shocking or frightening contents [EB11]. Other researchers focus on the evaluation of the perceived usefulness of different content types. In this context, relevant factors for the usefulness of reviews have also been researched [Ba12]. Here it is evident that contents from participants with a high reputation are more frequently perceived as useful [RF12]. Background information (e.g. a real photo or name) about the reviewer, in contrast, has no influence on the perceived usefulness of the content [RF12]. Yet user-generated eWoM contents are deemed in principle as more trustworthy than editorial contents or contents prepared for advertising, although they frequently cannot compete on quality [Di11]. Hence, many firms have already taken to actively monitoring and controlling their reputation on corresponding review media by e.g. responding to criticism [Oc10]. This makes sense because responding to complaints is usually reflected in a better review of the firm [Le13].

5 Implications

The results presented in this paper convey an overall overview of the status quo of research in the field of eWoM. We conducted a comprehensive literature analysis and determined the 33 most relevant publications in the field on the basis of their citation frequency. Additionally, we grouped the content of these publications into five core research areas. The results provide a compact overview of where research currently stands in the field of eWoM, and may serve as a framework for further research. In addition, relevant gaps are identified for exploration in future research projects.

The majority of existing papers in the field concentrate on the sender of eWoM communications. Thus, there is need for complementary research into eWoM recipients. Among other options, research could focus on how contributions by paid reviewers, or even bogus reviews, affect the trust level of eWoM recipients. Existing research also backs up the assumption that eWoM has been mainly studied so far in terms of the impact on purchase decisions.

As a limitation of this study, it must be stated that analysis is confined to four relevant literature databases. However, we are confident that most of the relevant research papers are covered in these databases and were taken into consideration.

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